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A

FUNERAL DISCOURSE,

ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEATH OF

MRS. MARIA HART,

DELIVERED AT STONINGTON, SEPT. 27, '57,

BY WILLIAM CLIFT,

Pastor of the Second Congregational Church, in Stonington.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

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STARR & FARNHAM, PRINTERS, CORNER OF STATE AND MAIN STREETS.
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SERMON.

Lord, now lettest thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word.
LUKE I: 29.

The incidents recorded in the context concerning Simeon are all that we know of him. He is there presented to us, in connection with the aged Anna, a prophetess, as waiting in the temple for the coming of the Messiah. They are probably mentioned as the representatives of a class, not then very numerous among the Jews, who kept alive spiritual religion in their hearts, under the forms and ceremonies of the temple worship. They waited upon God in the sanctuary with special diligence, and with earnest longing for the coming of the Messiah. It is said of Anna, that she was a widow of about four score and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers, night and day. By this, we are to understand, that she was an habitual worshipper, and had led a devout and prayerful life, all the days of her widowhood, a period that must have extended over fifty years. Of Simeon, it is said, that he was "just, and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Ghost was upon him."

To persons, who waited so humbly and constantly upon God, there was, of course, granted large measures of grace. They saw a meaning in the rites of the temple, that was not apparent to the proud and worldly minded Pharisee. They saw in the bleeding victims offered upon the altar, types of

the great sacrifice for sin foretold in their prophets. The visions of Isaiah were not so much the shadowy outlines of gospel times, as historic pages, relating scenes already transpired. Faith threw over them all, the air of reality. They seemed to live in gospel times, though the Messiah had not yet come. They were as watchers at the close of a long and dreary night, looking with intense desire for the first glimmering of the dawn, and seeing its indications long before they were visible to the sleepers around them.

They were brought into so close communion with God, by lives of prayer, that they received assurances of answers to their supplications. God revealed to them, as he did not to a worldly minded and sensualized church, what he was about to do for Israel, and for the world. Prophecy was now to be fulfilled; the Messiah was coming, and it was granted to them, as a special favor, that they should behold with their own eyes the desire of the nations, before they died. They were prepared for the advent, and knew the infant Savior when he was first brought to the temple, to receive the initiatory rite of the Jewish church. What emotions of rapture now fill the hearts of these aged saints, as they beheld the sublime mystery unfolded—God manifest in the flesh! Here was the end of types and shadows, the glorious reality, to which all temple rites had been pointing for generations past. Here was the sight, which kings and prophets longed to see, but saw not; and they, in their old age, were permitted to see it. "Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people. A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel." He had reached a fitting close of a long life, his work on earth was finished, he was ready to go to his rest. Death was no more an unwelcome event. He hailed it with joy. "Lord, now lettest thy servant depart in peace."

The desirableness of death to the aged christian, is the theme to which the text invites our attention.

1. It is desirable on account of the infirmities of the body. Whatever may be the strength of natural constitution, however wisely a man may have husbanded it, the physical powers begin to decay. The Psalmist utters a general truth, when he says, "The days of our years are three score years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength, labor, and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away." The body, in its full strength, is a fit medium for the soul to hold converse with the external world. While its powers are perfect, it grows in knowledge and strength. The senses bring in continually new supplies of mental food, new enjoyments, and the mind assumes its full proportions. It is dependant, somewhat, upon the organs of the body for its own development. When these begin to decay, its progress is hindered, and, in extreme old age, it gives no evidence of increasing knowledge or power. There is a limit, soon reached, to all that the soul can know or do on earth. The aged Christian feels this. All through his life, he has been receiving premonitions of the decay of his earthly tabernacle. And as his faith has taken hold of another life, with a strong grasp, these premonitions have not been unwelcome. He has seen the frost thickening in the locks upon his brow, and has never felt that "the hoary head was not a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness." His vision has grown dim, and he welcomes the aid of art, to help him to commune with nature, and with books, as in his younger years. Not unlikely the ear has lost its quickness of perception, and he listens with increasing difficulty to the voice of friends. All the sensibilities may lose their freshness, and the conviction may come home to him, with increasing power, that he can no longer enjoy, in their fulness, the temporal blessings which God bestows. The keen relish of youth and manhood has gone, and this loss of susceptibility seperates him more and more from the society of the middle aged, and the young. He has lost his sympathy for those objects and pursuits, which yield the highest gratification to them. Whatever

his past activity in the honorable business of life, or in the duties of religion, there comes a time when his strength fails. The physical powers no longer obey the will. If desire has not failed, the members of the body fail to execute these wishes. Conscious weakness pervades the soul. The hand is no longer firm and steady, the flesh fails, the skin loses its ruddy glow, wrinkles furrow the brow and the cheeks, and the step is no longer vigorous and elastic, every effort is felt to be a labor. The aged disciple feels that he can no longer fill the place he has once filled, in the household, in the church, and in society. This conscious loss of power, this willing to do, with the sense of inability to execute the behests of the will, is one of the most painful convictions that ever comes home to us. It is full of meaning to the aged, the harbinger of death. But it has no sorrow to the Christian; for he firmly believes that the soul will yet put on a spiritual body, in which all his desires and purposes will find easy and joyous expression. "For we *know* that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For, in this, we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house, which is from heaven. If so be that being clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we, that are in this tabernacle, do groan, being burdened; not for that we would be unclothed but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life." These sublime words of Paul have a meaning to the aged disciple, that we cannot comprehend, in youth or middle age.

2. The aged disciple desires to depart because these infirmities prevent the progress of the soul in knowledge, and in Christian activity. Progress is a law of mind, so long as it can act freely. While the physical powers are in their highest perfection, the mind constantly gains knowledge, and facility in its use. All the gifts and attainments of the Christian are consecrated to the service of God. He derives a large part of his happiness from the consciousness that he is useful in life. He is enabled to minister to the

wants of others. His attainments are serviceable in many ways, to his fellow men. He sees, or thinks he sees, in his intercourse with others, that he has reached the limit of his mental progress, and of his usefulness on earth. These may increase, but he must decrease. He sees others crowding into the places he has filled, and attracting the attention that has been bestowed upon him. With him, there is to be no more advance, no more increase of mental power, no higher activity in the service of God. This, in itself, is not a desirable position. He knows it is only temporary, that when he is clothed upon, with the house that is from Heaven, his soul will resume all its activities, and go on in endless progress. Death is a welcome thought to him, as it will restore him to the full possession of all his mental powers, to the full enjoyment of all those treasures of knowledge which he has gathered during life.

3. The breaking up of domestic and social ties also makes death look desirable. There is, perhaps, less of decay in our social susceptibilities, than in any other part of our natures. And this only renders the loss of friends, and relatives more deeply felt, the longer we live. In manhood, the circle of love and endearment, in which we are most interested, is largest. We are continually making new friends, so that the loss of the companions of our childhood is more than made up to us. We go out from the homes of our youth to establish new families, and to gather around us children and friends. But no sooner are we established in life, and reach the height of our social blessings and enjoyments, than they begin to wane.

"There is no flock, however watched and tended,
But one dead lamb is there,
There is no fireside, howsoe'er defended,
But has one vacant chair."

"The air is full of farewells to the dying
And mournings for the dead,
The heart of Rachel, for her children crying,
Will not be comforted."

And every friend that dies, every domestic loss does but make dearer the waning few, who are left. The wealth of love lavished upon the many, in manhood, is centered upon the broken remnant, in old age. What a long and sorrowful discipline has the aged disciple suffered in this respect! He can look back and see how death has severed the ties that bound him to the world, and narrowed down the circle of his social enjoyments to the smallest measure. All his four-score years lie spread out before him as a scene of yesterday. The bereavements of his early manhood come up before him with the freshness of a present reality; the children he laid down in the grave, before they knew good from evil; the children of maturer years, the son who was the beginning of his strength, and the prospective stay of his declining years; the daughter, cut off in the first bloom of womanhood; the wife of his youth, called hence when his household most needed a mother's care and tenderness; the friends who were the companions and counsellors of his manhood, cut off in the midst of life's busy cares. He remembers them all. Their voices, their forms come back to him in dreams, and the visions of the night do but make the solitude of his waking hours more painfully felt. True God is good, and mercy is mingled in all the discipline through which he has past. His faith is firm in God, and his communion with him sweet. But this religious faith, however childlike and submissive, was never designed to satisfy the longings of his social nature. This craves the society of the loved ones he has lost. This looks forward with earnest longings and with unshaken faith to a blessed reunion in the spirit world. He doubts not that

> "In that great cloister's stillness and seclusion
> By guardian Angels led,
> Safe from temptation, safe from sin's pollution
> They live, whom we call dead."

> "Day after day, he thinks what they are doing,
> In those bright realms of air;
> Year after year, their tender steps pursuing,
> Beholds them grown more fair."

Is it strange, that this longing rises to irrepressible desire in the aged, that they would go to the departed, as a lonely pilgrim, among strangers, turns with elastic step toward home. Death has no longer a forbidding aspect. It restores them to the friends they have lost, to that companionship which was most genial and comforting to their hearts.

4. The aged disciple desires death as a revealer of the mysteries of the spirit world. The soul was made to know; and the curiosity which all feel concerning the things that lie beyond the vail, is only impertinent, while we remain in the flesh. God has wisely hidden these things from us, because they do not pertain to our present duties and enjoyments. The pretended revelations from the spirit world in modern times, profane and trifling though they are, bear testimony to the instinctive longing of the soul for this knowledge. At death, God will remove the vail of the flesh. We shall have entered upon a new mode of existence, and new duties, for which new stores of knowledge alone can fit us. This, we have every reason to believe, will be surpassingly great; so great, that in comparison with it, all our earthly knowledge may be said to vanish away—"For we know in part, and we prophecy in part; But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part, but then, shall I know as also I am known" The aged saint, as he looks back upon life, sees many strange dealings of God's providence with him. He cannot comprehend their reason, though he doubts not their reasonableness. He has been constrained to take them without murmuring, simply because a Father sent them. Many a time has he been compelled to say with the Psalmist, "I was dumb and opened not my mouth because thou didst it." These dark Providences, and all the mysteries of God's moral government will be cleared up in the spirit world. He has seen much of the salvation of the Lord in his life, that he could easily comprehend. He doubts not, that every thing else will be

unfolded to him, in the brighter light of eternity. All that he has seen of salvation here, kindles his desire to see more of it in the future world. Is it strange that he asks for a peaceful departure for heaven?

5. He desires death, from the full conviction, that the great cause for which he has lived, and toiled, and prayed, will go forward to its accomplishment, without him. Simeon beheld in the advent of the Messiah, the future triumphs of the church. The infant Savior was to be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Israel. Anna congratulated all who looked for redemption in Israel. Their work was done; they might well enter into rest.

Confidence in the final triumphs of the gospel—in the earth grows with our spiritual growth. All that we have seen and felt of the salvation of the Lord ourselves, increases our faith in the necessity of this salvation for the whole human family. There must come a time when these claims shall be universally admitted, when Jesus shall see of the travail of his soul, and be satisfied. And the feeling of our insignificance, as helpers in this work, also grows with our increasing prayerfulness and piety. In the ardor of our first love, in the full strength of our physical powers, we are prone to over-estimate our own importance in this work. The disciple fills his place well. It is a pardonable weakness in him to suppose that no other could fill it so well. But a higher christian experience assures him that the great work of salvation will go forward triumphantly, whether he be removed early or late from his toils. He has lived to little purpose, as a christian, if he has not raised up under his influence those who shall perpetuate his labors, and more than fill his place. The aged disciple feels this. He mourns not over his wasting strength, or his approaching death. He has seen so much of the salvation of the Lord, that he is assured of its final triumph.

6. Finally he desires death, as the fitting culmination of his temporal life. His earthly existence would lose its beauty, if it were to have no end. "I would not live al-

way" is a feeling that grows stronger in the sanctified, the longer they live. To live here always! What is it but to be subject to pain and to sin? What, but to be always on trial and never proven? What, but to be forever in the crucible, and never purged of our dross? What, but to have Heaven always in prospect, and never reach that blessed abode? Surely, no child of God but would pray to be delivered from such a doom of Tantalus as this. It is meet that our pilgrimage should have its end; that our day of toil with its heat and its burden should have its setting sun; that our conflict with its blood and its scars, should have its triumph and its wreaths of victory. Rest! Rest! Blessed word! How it thrills upon the heart of the toil worn and struggling christian! "There remaineth a rest for the people of God." He longs to enter into it. He sighs for his crown of rejoicing. With Paul at the court of the bloody Nero, he can exclaim "I am ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which, the Lord the righteous judge shall give me at that day."

We have seen that death is a desirable prospect to the christian, on account of the decay of his physical powers; because this decay hinders his progress in knowledge and christian activity; because it restores him to the christian friends he has lost; because it opens to him the mysteries of the spirit world, and of salvation; because others will succeed him in his labors for the cause of Christ; and because death is the fitting culmination of his temporal life.

1. Notice, in conclusion, that every aged disciple, who dies in this age of the church, sees far more of the salvation of the Lord, than Simeon was permitted to see. He praised God for the advent of the Savior, as the crowning joy of his life. We see the blessed results of that advent, the gospel doing its work, and receiving its triumphs in the earth. What the gospel will do for the race is no longer a

problem. It is a problem solved. It is demonstrated to be the power of God, and the wisdom of God, for the salvation of all who believe. It is the regenerator of individuals and communities, and the world is the witness of the transformation.

The aged sister in this church, who has just gone to her rest, and whose death we deplore to-day, was permitted to see much of this salvation. She could look back over a residence here of nearly fifty years; a period, to her, of earnest solicitude, self-denial and prayerfulness for the church of Christ. When she entered this field of labor with the companion of her youth, they found it a spiritual desolation. The church was feeble in strength and few in numbers. The whole region east of the Thames had been burnt over with the fanatical wildfire of the Separatists, and was a field for Missionary labor.*

Their settlement here begins a new era for spiritual religion. The faithful preaching of the doctrine of the cross had its legitimate influence in the conversion of souls The faith of God's people was strengthened, and many were added unto the church. She was permitted to see repeated revivals of religion, under the ministry of her husband and of his successors in office; the feeble church, over which he was installed, growing strong in numbers, in worldly substance, and in christian graces, until it has sent forth its third colony. She had seen the desolate church become three bands, all efficient in supporting gospel institutions among themselves, and in contributing to the spread of the gospel in other lands. She had not only seen this, but the rise of sister churches of other denominations upon the same field, giving equally good evidence of the power of the gospel to save sinners. She saw the public morals greatly improved, public sentiment in regard to christianity entirely changed, and the power of spiritual religion increased many fold. Well might she say, in view of the sal-

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* See Note A.

vation which God had wrought in her day,—"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace."

2. Notice the connection between prayer and the salvation of the Lord. Simeon and Anna, to whom so much was revealed, were devout and prayerful in their old age. They served God with fastings and prayers, night and day. For long years they had prayed and waited for the coming of the Messiah. And when their eyes saw him, they were right in regarding his advent as an answer to the prayers of God's people. Their own suplications were heard. They had occasion to praise God, and to speak of his goodness to those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. Our departed sister was pre-eminently a woman of prayer, and for the larger part of her residence here, she maintained at her own house, a weekly meeting for this object, with exemplary punctuality, and persistence. She had faith in God, as a keeper of covenants, and sought to interest the devout and prayerful, in supplications for her household. Who, that believes in a prayer hearing God, can doubt, that her supplications were connected with the salvation of the Lord, which she was permitted to witness; that prayer to God underlaid all this work of reform, all this change of public sentiment in regard to Christianity, all this triumph of spiritual religion among us? In this, she was a worthy example for all the members of this church, and their faith should be greatly strengthened by her blessed experience. Hardly anything that we can ask of God for the advance of spiritual religion among us, can be so improbable, to human vision, as the state of things we now witness would have been fifty years ago. A prophet, who should have foretold these things then, would not have been believed; yet faith in God, importunity at the mercy seat, has realized them; and we are reaping the blessed results of the prayers and toils of those who sleep in Jesus.

Fellow disciples, shall we rise to higher degrees of faith, and ask God for greater blessings? Shall we feel more deeply than ever, that all our strength is in God, and with

child-like faith look to him, in the secret place, in the circle of prayer, and in the solemn assembly? Shall another generation, our children and children's children, trained to habits of piety by our godly example, bless God, for our prayerful and devoted lives, as we praise him, this day, for the self denying and prayerful life of our departed sister?

3. We see how it is that death loses its sting. It is only by living near to God, by an absorbing interest in Christ's kingdom, by a life of prayer. Death had no terrors for her who has departed. She expressed no fear in regard to her acceptance with God. The summons found her ready. She relied wholly upon the righteousness of Christ. She spoke of death as calmly as of taking a journey for a day. Her only solicitude seemed to be for those she was leaving behind, for her kindred, and for the church of Christ. The purpose that had ruled her life, was strong in death. She expressed her warmest sympathy for all her fellow-disciples in this church, and for all who loved Christ's cause in this community. She delivered her last messages on the morning of the holy Sabbath, and sank into the sleep that knows no waking. Who can doubt that death was gain to her, and that the things of Christ's kingdom, which were the burden and joy of her heart on earth, are now the themes of her exalted contemplation in the upper sanctuary.— Nothing but this faith in God, this life of prayer can take away the sting of death. My hearers, have you that faith? Do you lead that life of prayer? Are death and eternity familiar, pleasant thoughts, to your soul? Were death to come this day to you, would you have a peaceful departure to a better land? Oh, rest not, wordly minded disciple, till your faith has taken new hold of Christ. Rest not, fellow sinner, till you have found shelter beneath the cross of Christ. There, and there alone, "death is swallowed up in victory."

Note A. "One change in the county, surpassing all others, in magnitude and interest, remains to be mentioned. When I was ordained here in 1806, I was the only pastor of a Congregational church, on a territory in Connecticut, of fifty miles in length, by twelve in width. Eleven large contiguous parishes, stretching from Sterling to the sea-board on the line of Rhode Island; thence to the western boundary of East Lyme; thence northward to the southern line of Colchester, were except New London, destitute of Congregational ministers. Sterling and Voluntown belonged to Windham County; the other nine parishes were within our precinct. What rendered this desolation deeply afflicting and appalling was, no prospect nor hope existed, that any of the parishes, Stonington excepted would spontaneously and unaided, obtain a settled minister. In 1808, the Rev. Ira Hart took charge of the church in Stonington, and in 1811 the Rev. Timothy Tuttle became the pastor of the church in Groton, and of the church in North Groton; an event better than our hope. In all the residue of the wide waste, nothing indicated resuscitation or improvement. Wealth enough there was; people enough there were; a meeting-house stood in every parish; but men of energy, influence, and device, to step forth and regain the ministry, were not to be found. Preaching of many kinds, other than Congregational, much of it transient and irregular, swept over the region. This awful desolation was the result of the fanatical ministry of Davenport and his coadjutors, who invaded these churches, seventy years before. From churches, whose pastors then withstood the operations of these fanatics, secessions occurred, of people who formed themselves into churches, which took for themselves the appellation, Separates. When the pastors of these churches, which were by secessions enfeebled, died, their parishes became and remained vacant. The few pastors who were at length established on the outposts of this waste, were impatient of this rapid and constant degeneracy toward a state of heathenism, in a land of christianity. At the parsonage in this parish, one evening, in 1815, the Rev. Ira Hart and myself conversed on the subject, and formed a project for a county missionary society, to restore the dilapidated churches and societies. The project, after a few weeks, was referred to the association, who, after consultation, resolved to forward a petition to the General Association of the State, soon to meet at Farmington, that a home Missionary Society might be instituted, for repairing the waste places in Connecticut and its vicinity. The proposition was quickly and heartily embraced, and in the course of the ensuing year, such a society was established, the first of this kind in the United States. From calamities and local degradations, great religious enterprises are often originated. From the lamented desolation in New London County, originated a work, which has spread, and which is still to spread its splendor over this broad country. This event will be an item in the history of New London County."—*Rev. Dr. McEwen's Half Century Sermon.*